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Mutual responsibility for cleanups

By **ROGER MORRIS**

The Environmental Protection Agency has spent between \$25 million and \$30 million in Libby for just over two years of investigation and cleanup of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite in the Libby area.

This is almost as much as remains in the agency's trust fund for environmental cleanups. According to

Guest Opinion

The New York Times, a projected \$28 million will be in the fund for the next fiscal year budget.

While EPA on-site coordinator Paul Peronard and others have said there is plenty of money available for not only Libby's vermiculite cleanup but the removal of insulation from Libby-area buildings, the Times' report is less than encouraging. This is especially bad news when states — Montana at the top of the list — are proving themselves incapable of preventing such disasters and unable to mitigate the damages.

The Superfund was funded from the early 1980s through 1995 by a special corporate tax. The Times is reporting that petroleum and chemical companies lobbied to have Congress let the tax lapse. I seem to remember some discussion on the

fund containing so much money — boosted by interest — that it would take a long time to siphon off the money.

This is good news for those people who don't believe there is a problem or that Americans and American businesses should be held accountable for the messes they create or leave behind. It's bad news for the U.S. taxpayer who is expected to shoulder the needs of the fund entirely.

President George W. Bush is against renewing the tax and will not ask Congress to reinstate it, according to his 2003 budget. The tax had been reauthorized by both President Reagan and Bush the elder.

Unfortunately Clinton didn't consider it a worthy battle to take on, and neither do so-called environmental groups who focus instead on issues that are easier to sell — fundraising — to the public and American business.

When the fund authority lapsed in 1995, taxpayers were contributing about 21 percent of the funds, according to The New York Times. In 1999, the taxpayers shouldered about 50 percent or \$700 million of the burden. That is expected to continue through 2003.

Congress needs to revisit this issue. I'm not proposing that businesses should pay the burden alone.

After all, we citizens benefit from many of the activities that lead to the pollution in terms of jobs, corporate profits and community development. However, we are also the people who feel the immediate health, environmental and economic impacts.

No, regardless of your feelings toward corporate America, we have unwritten partnerships with U.S. companies and should share some of the burden. But we shouldn't have to carry the weight of the entire fund nor should we have to endure the negative impacts to health and environment.

If corporate America and the president find the tax distasteful, perhaps they should work harder at eliminating the pollution or potential pollution. And if the American public is concerned about the onerous effects to health and environment that some businesses leave as a legacy, perhaps they should look more carefully at what they invite into their communities with welcome arms in the name of economic development.

It comes down to a lot of responsibility on both sides and a high degree of attentiveness by everyone. Just because we have a law doesn't mean it works.

Morris is publisher of The Western News in Libby.